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AN  
INDIGENOUS  
PEOPLES'  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
UNITED STATES

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

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## COMMANDER AND CHIEF

Andrew Jackson is enshrined in most US history texts in a chapter titled “The Age of Jackson,” “The Age of Democracy,” “The Birth of Democracy,” or some variation thereon.<sup>26</sup> The Democratic Party claims Jackson and Jefferson as its founders. Every year, state and national Democratic organizations hold fund-raising events they call Jefferson-Jackson Dinners. They understand that Thomas Jefferson was the thinker and Jackson the doer in forging populist democracy for full participation in the fruits of colonialism based on the opportunity available to Anglo settlers.

Jackson carried out the original plan envisioned by the founders—particularly Jefferson—initially as a Georgia militia leader, then as an army general who led four wars of aggression against the Muskogees in Georgia and Florida, and finally as a president who engineered the expulsion of all Native peoples east of the Mississippi to the designated “Indian Territory.” As the late Cherokee principal chief Wilma Mankiller wrote in her autobiography:

The fledgling United States government’s method of dealing with native people—a process which then included systematic genocide, property theft, and total subjugation—reached its nadir in 1830 under the federal policy of President Andrew Jackson. More than any other president, he used forcible removal to expel the eastern tribes from their land. From the very birth of the nation, the United States government truly had carried out a vigorous operation of extermination and removal. Decades before Jackson took office, during the administration of Thomas Jefferson, it was already cruelly apparent to many Native American leaders that any hope for tribal autonomy was cursed. So were any thoughts of peaceful coexistence with white citizens.<sup>27</sup>

It’s not that Jackson had a “dark side,” as his apologists rationalize and which all human beings have, but rather that Jackson *was* the Dark Knight in the formation of the United States as a colonialist, imperialist democracy, a dynamic formation that continues to constitute the core of US patriotism. The most revered presidents—Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, both Roosevelts, Truman, Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton, Obama—have each advanced populist imperialism while gradually increasing inclusion of other groups beyond the core of descendants of old settlers into the ruling mythology. All the presidents after Jackson march in his footsteps. Consciously or not, they refer back to him on what is acceptable, how to reconcile democracy and genocide and characterize it as freedom for the people.

Jackson was a national military hero, but he was rooted in the Scots-Irish frontier communities, most of whose people, unlike

him, remained impoverished. Their small farms were hard-pressed to compete with large plantations with thousands of acres of cotton planted and each tended by hundreds of enslaved Africans. Land-poor white rural people saw Jackson as the man who would save them, making land available to them by ridding it of Indians, thereby setting the pattern of the dance between poor and rich US Americans ever since under the guise of equality of opportunity. When Jackson was inaugurated in 1829, he opened the White House to the public, the majority in attendance being humble poor whites. Jackson was easily reelected in 1832, although landless settlers had acquired very little land, and what little they seized was soon lost to speculators, transformed into ever larger plantations worked by slave labor.

The late Jackson biographer Michael Paul Rogin observed:

Indian removal was Andrew Jackson’s major policy aim in the quarter-century before he became President. His Indian wars and treaties were principally responsible for dispossessing the southern Indians during those years. His presidential Indian removal finished the job. . . . During the years of Jacksonian Democracy, 1824–52, five of the ten major candidates for President had either won reputations as generals in Indian wars or served as Secretary of War, whose major responsibility in this period was relations with the Indians. Historians, however, have failed to place Indians at the center of Jackson’s life. They have interpreted the Age of Jackson from every perspective but Indian destruction, the one from which it actually developed historically.<sup>28</sup>

Once elected president, Jackson lost no time in initiating the removal of all the Indigenous farmers and the destruction of all their towns in the South. In his first annual message to Congress, he wrote: “The emigration should be voluntary, for it would be as cruel as unjust to compel the aborigines to abandon the graves of their fathers and seek a home in a distant land. But they should be distinctly informed that if they remain within the limits of the States they must be subject to their laws. In return for their obedience as individuals they will without doubt be protected in the enjoyment

of those possessions which they have improved by their industry.”<sup>29</sup> This political code language barely veils the intention to forcibly remove the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muskogee, and Seminole Nations, followed by all other Indigenous communities from east of the Mississippi River, except for the many who could not be rounded up and remained, without land, without acknowledgment, until the successful struggles of some of them for recognition in the late twentieth century.

The state of Georgia saw Jackson's election as a green light and claimed most of the Cherokee Nation's territory as public land. The Georgia legislature resolved that the Cherokee constitution and laws were null and void and that Cherokees were subject to Georgia law. The Cherokee Nation took a case against Georgia to the US Supreme Court. With Chief Justice John Marshall writing for the majority, the Court ruled in favor of the Cherokees. Jackson ignored the Supreme Court, however, in effect saying that John Marshall had made his decision and Marshall would have to enforce it if he could, although he, Jackson, had an army while Marshall did not.

While the case was working its way through the courts, gold was discovered in Georgia in 1829, which quickly brought some forty thousand eager gold seekers to run roughshod over Cherokee lands, squatting, looting, killing, and destroying fields and game parks. Under authority granted by the Indian Removal Act, passed by Congress in 1830, the United States drew up a treaty that would cede all Cherokee lands to the government in exchange for land in “Indian Territory.” The US government held Cherokee leaders in jail and closed their printing press during negotiations with a few handpicked Cherokees, who provided the bogus signatures Jackson needed as a cover for forced removal.<sup>30</sup>

#### TRAILS OF TEARS

Not only the great southern nations were driven into exile, but also nearly all the Native nations east of the Mississippi were forced off their lands and relocated to Indian Territory, seventy thousand peo-

ple in all. During the Jacksonian period, the United States made eighty-six treaties with twenty-six Indigenous nations between New York and the Mississippi, all of them forcing land sessions, including removals. Some communities fled to Canada and Mexico rather than going to Indian Territory.<sup>31</sup> When Sauk leader Black Hawk led his people back from a winter stay in Iowa to their homeland in Illinois in 1832 to plant corn, the squatter settlers there claimed they were being invaded, bringing in both Illinois militia and federal troops. The “Black Hawk War” that is narrated in history texts was no more than a slaughter of Sauk farmers. The Sauks tried to defend themselves but were starving when Black Hawk surrendered under a white flag. Still the soldiers fired, resulting in a bloodbath. In his surrender speech, Black Hawk spoke bitterly of the enemy:

You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it. Indians are not deceitful. The white men speak bad of the Indian and look at him spitefully. But the Indian does not tell lies. Indians do not steal. An Indian who is as bad as the white men could not live in our nation; he would be put to death and eaten up by the wolves. . . . We told them to leave us alone, and keep away from us; they followed on, and beset our paths, and they coiled themselves among us, like the snake. They poisoned us by their touch. We were not safe. We lived in danger.<sup>32</sup>

The Sauks were rounded up and driven onto a reservation called Sac and Fox.

Most Cherokees had held out in remaining in their homeland despite pressure from federal administrations from Jefferson on to migrate voluntarily to the Arkansas-Oklahoma-Missouri area of the Louisiana Purchase territory. The Cherokee Nation addressed removal:

We are aware that some persons suppose it will be for our advantage to remove beyond the Mississippi. We think otherwise. Our people universally think otherwise. . . . We wish to remain on the land of our fathers. We have a perfect and original right to remain without interruption or molestation. The

treaties with us, and laws of the United States made in pursuance of treaties, guarantee our residence and our privileges, and secure us against intruders. Our only request is, that these treaties may be fulfilled, and these laws executed.<sup>33</sup>

A few contingents of Cherokees settled in Arkansas and what became Indian Territory as early as 1817. There was a larger migration in 1832, which came after the Indian Removal Act. The 1838 forced march of the Cherokee Nation, now known as the Trail of Tears, was an arduous journey from remaining Cherokee homelands in Georgia and Alabama to what would later become northeastern Oklahoma. After the Civil War, journalist James Mooney interviewed people who had been involved in the forced removal. Based on these firsthand accounts, he described the scene in 1838, when the US Army removed the last of the Cherokees by force:

Under [General Winfield] Scott's orders the troops were disposed at various points throughout the Cherokee country, where stockade forts were erected for gathering in and holding the Indians preparatory to removal. From these, squads of troops were sent to search out with rifle and bayonet every small cabin hidden away in the coves or by sides of mountain streams, to seize and bring in as prisoners all the occupants, however or wherever they might be found. Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway and rose up to be driven with blows and oaths along the weary miles of trail that led to the stockade. Men were seized in their fields or going along the road, women were taken from their wheels and children from their play. In many cases, on turning for one last look as they crossed the ridge, they saw their homes in flames, fired by the lawless rabble that followed on the heels of the soldiers to loot and pillage. So keen were these outlaws on the scene that in some instances they were driving off the cattle and other stock of the Indians almost before the soldiers had fairly started their owners in the other direction. Systematic hunts were made by the same men for Indian graves, to rob them of the silver pendants and other valuables

deposited with the dead. A Georgia volunteer, afterward a colonel in the Confederate service, said: "I fought through the civil war and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruelest work I ever knew."<sup>34</sup>

Half of the sixteen thousand Cherokee men, women, and children who were rounded up and force-marched in the dead of winter out of their country perished on the journey.

The Muskogeans and Seminoles suffered similar death rates in their forced transfer, while the Chickasaws and Choctaws lost around 15 percent of their people en route. An eyewitness account by Alexis de Tocqueville, the French observer of the day, captures one of thousands of similar scenes in the forced deportation of the Indigenous peoples from the Southeast:

I saw with my own eyes several of the cases of misery which I have been describing; and I was the witness of sufferings which I have not the power to portray.

At the end of the year 1831, whilst I was on the left bank of the Mississippi at a place named by Europeans Memphis, there arrived a numerous band of Choctaws (or Chactas, as they are called by the French in Louisiana). These savages had left their country, and were endeavoring to gain the right bank of the Mississippi, where they hoped to find an asylum which had been promised them by the American government. It was then the middle of winter, and the cold was unusually severe; the snow had frozen hard upon the ground, and the river was drifting huge masses of ice. The Indians had their families with them; and they brought in their train the wounded and sick, with children newly born, and old men upon the verge of death. They possessed neither tents nor wagons, but only their arms and some provisions. I saw them embark to pass the mighty river, and never will that solemn spectacle fade from my remembrance. No cry, no sob was heard amongst the assembled crowd; all were silent. Their calamities were of ancient date, and they knew them to be irremediable. The

Indians had all stepped into the bark which was to carry them across, but their dogs remained upon the bank. As soon as these animals perceived that their masters were finally leaving the shore, they set up a dismal howl, and, plunging all together into the icy waters of the Mississippi, they swam after the boat.<sup>35</sup>

In his biography of Jackson, Rogin points out that this was no endgame: "The dispossession of the Indians . . . did not happen once and for all in the beginning. America was continually beginning again on the frontier, and as it expanded across the continent, it killed, removed, and drove into extinction one tribe after another."<sup>36</sup>

Against all odds, some Indigenous peoples refused to be removed and stayed in their traditional homelands east of the Mississippi. In the South, the communities that did not leave lost their traditional land titles and status as Indians in the eyes of the government, but many survived as peoples, some fighting successfully in the late twentieth century for federal acknowledgment and official Indigenous status. In the north, especially in New England, some states had illegally taken land and created guardian systems and small reservations, such as those of the Penobscots and Passamaquoddies in Maine, both of which won lawsuits against the states and attained federal acknowledgment during the militant movements of the 1970s. Many other Native nations have been able to increase their land bases.

#### THE PERSISTENCE OF DENIAL

Andrew Jackson was born to squatters under British rule on Indigenous land. His life followed the trajectory of continental imperialism as he made his career of taking Indigenous land, from the time of Jefferson's presidency to the elimination of Indigenous nations east of the Mississippi. This process was the central fact of US politics and the basis for the US economy. Two-thirds of the US population of nearly four million at the time of independence lived within fifty miles of the Atlantic Ocean. During the following half century, more than four million settlers crossed the Appalachians, one of the

largest and most rapid migrations in world history. Jackson was an actor who made possible the implementation of the imperialist project of the independent United States, but he was also an exponent of the Euro-American popular will that favored imperialism and the virtually free land it provided them.

During the period of Jackson's military and executive power, a mythology emerged that defined the contours and substance of the US origin narrative, which has weathered nearly two centuries and remains intact in the early twenty-first century as patriotic cant, a civic religion invoked in Barack Obama's presidential inaugural address in January 2009:

In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of shortcuts or settling for less.

It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame.

Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things—some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor—who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.

For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth.

For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.

Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.

This is the journey we continue today.<sup>37</sup>

Spoken like a true descendant of old settlers. President Obama raised another key element of the national myth in an interview a few days

later with Al Arabiya television in Dubai. Affirming that the United States could be an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he said: “We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect. But if you look at the track record, as you say, America was not born as a colonial power.”

The affirmation of democracy requires the denial of colonialism, but denying it does not make it go away.